

RIDER EXPERIENCE FOR PARATRANSIT DEDICATED ACCESSIBLE TRANSIT SERVICE

Recommendation

That the September 17, 2024, City Operations report CO02352, be received for information.

Requested Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Urban Places		
City Plan Values	ACCESS		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Inclusive and compassionate A community of communities	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Mobility Network
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C539A - Transit Service Policy • Transit Service Standards • DATS Program Service Enhancements 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • February 6, 2024, City Operations report CO01552, Commingle Paratransit and On Demand Services • May 1, 2023, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01190, Vehicle for Hire Program's 2022 and 2023 Workplan Overview • October 16, 2020, City Operations report CR_8036, Accessible Transit Voucher Pilot Program • October 16, 2020, , City Operations report CR_7353, DATS Program Service Enhancements - Update and Next Steps • November 18, 2019, City Operations report CR_7354, DATS Program Service - 20 minute services window • October 15, 2018, City Operations report CR_5823, DATS Challenges, Data and Improvements 		

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Previous Council/Committee Action

At the February 6, 2024 Urban Planning Committee meeting, the following motion was passed:

That Administration provides a report outlining options to improve the rider experience for paratransit Dedicated Accessible Transit Service (DATS) service, including the pickup window for trips and late night travel.

Executive Summary

- Since 2019, Administration has implemented several process and technology enhancements to Dedicated Accessible Transit Service (DATS) as part of the DATS Program Service Enhancements strategy to improve the rider experience.
- While ongoing service enhancements continue to improve the rider experience, there are additional opportunities that can provide further enhancement. This includes expanding operating service hours, providing more spontaneous transportation options on the day of service, and shortening the pick-up window.
- Work is also underway to integrate dispatch technology with taxi companies, providing further benefits to DATS riders and those needing accessible private taxi service.

REPORT

DATS is a door-to-door shared ride public transportation service to any location in Edmonton, provided to those who are not able to use conventional transit service. Unlike conventional transit, DATS trips are booked in advance to ensure vehicles are being utilized efficiently to accommodate all trip requests. DATS uses multiple vehicle types to accommodate the diverse needs of riders, including lift buses, minivans, wheelchair accessible minivans, and taxi sedans. All DATS drivers are trained to support passengers to and from the first set of accessible doors to the vehicle, provide assistance with seating and to safely secure mobility aids.

An accessible transit network includes both conventional and paratransit service and enables citywide mobility, which contributes to an inclusive and equitable city for Edmontonians. Paratransit service plays an important role by providing access to transportation and mobility independence for Edmontonians with physical and/or cognitive disabilities. It helps remove barriers by ensuring every rider has access to the benefits of public transit. To advance this goal, DATS operates under core principles of service developed in consultation with riders and stakeholders. These principles are safety, respect, customer service, compassion and teamwork. In the first seven months of 2024, DATS trip volumes have increased to an average of 3,000 per week from 2,786 per week in 2023. Trip volumes are currently at 91 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

DATS is budgeted to meet specific annual service targets that ensure the availability and reliability of the service. These targets are:

- 98 per cent trip accommodation rate. This metric measures trip requests accepted and scheduled within an hour of the requested pick-up time.

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- 90 per cent on-time performance. This metric measures rider pick-ups occurring within the 30-minute pick-up window.

These service targets are carefully monitored to ensure service is provided equitably for all DATS riders, including ambulatory riders who are able to walk, often with the use of a mobility aid, or non-ambulatory riders who use a wheelchair. DATS service is carefully planned to ensure resources are available, accounting for seasonal and daily changes in demand and sufficient levels of wheelchair-accessible vehicles. DATS' annual trip volume and key performance targets are provided in Attachment 1.

As outlined in the February 6, 2024, City Operations report CO01552 Commingle Paratransit and On Demand Services, in 2019 Administration established a multi-year plan to improve paratransit service in Edmonton. An update on the implementation progress of the action items is provided in Attachment 2. These service enhancements have allowed DATS to meet service targets through periods of shifting demand in a cost-effective manner, while providing tangible improvements to the rider experience. As a result, rider satisfaction with DATS has improved, as outlined in Attachment 3.

Options to Improve the DATS Rider Experience

While ongoing service enhancement initiatives continue to improve the rider experience, there are additional opportunities available to further enhance the rider experience. This includes expanding operating service hours, providing more spontaneous transportation options on the day of service, as well as shortening the 30-minute pick-up window.

1. Expand Service Hours

DATS currently offers the following service hours:

- Sundays to Thursdays: 6 a.m. to 11 p.m.
- Fridays: 6 a.m. to midnight
- Saturdays: 6:30 a.m. to midnight
- Statutory holidays: 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.

DATS operating hours are determined based on service demands. The minimum average hourly trip volume target to provide service is 10 trips, and current analysis shows the last hour of DATS service is below this target. This approach is comparable to how decisions are made for service planning for conventional transit service. A jurisdictional scan (Attachment 4) shows that DATS' current operating service hours are generally aligned with other paratransit agencies in similarly-sized municipalities. Additionally, the annual DATS satisfaction survey results indicated other service improvement aspects, such as service reliability and on-board times, were of higher priority for respondents than expanding service hours.

However, Administration understands some DATS riders have emergent transportation needs that may be outside of the current service hours. For certain groups of DATS riders, adjusting service hours or increasing the availability of accessible taxis in Edmonton could lead to a significant improvement in their mobility and quality of life.

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Expanding DATS Service Hours

Expanding DATS service hours by one hour in the morning and one hour late at night could be achieved with an increase in operating funding to support additional operators, contracted service and operational support staff. Sufficient on-road resources would need to be provided to ensure geographical coverage of the city. DATS trips are intended to be a shared ride service; increasing service during off-peak times may be operationally less efficient. However, this change may provide more independence, increase mobility and flexibility for DATS riders.

Providing Subsidized Taxi Service to DATS Riders for Trips Outside of DATS Service Hours

Some paratransit services provide limited subsidies for taxi service to supplement transportation needs of paratransit riders not met by regular paratransit service. This could be a potentially cost-effective option to increase transportation options outside of DATS service hours, as it would not require investment in DATS drivers and support staff to extend operations beyond existing service hours.

In addition to a limited number of accessible taxis in Edmonton, taxi subsidy programs present several challenges. Programs using a voucher system can be challenging to administer and may be prone to misuse, as discussed in City Operations report CR_8036 Accessible Transit Voucher Pilot Program on October 16, 2020. Additionally, due to the limited availability of wheelchair accessible taxis, a taxi subsidy program would not benefit non-ambulatory DATS riders to the same extent it would to ambulatory riders who could use regular taxis. An integrated technology platform between DATS and taxi companies could help resolve some of these challenges, helping to implement an electronic subsidy program while providing Administration with oversight on accessible taxi availability and wait times. This would also require additional investment.

2. Providing More Spontaneous Transportation Options on the Day of Service

As paratransit service is primarily based on pre-booked trips to ensure shared-ride service can be planned to meet all rider needs, same-day bookings are not guaranteed. Currently, DATS is able to accommodate 100 per cent of trips booked in advance and approximately 30 per cent of trips requested on the day of service. Accommodating same-day trips helps to fill in spots left by trip cancellations and allows for some spontaneity and flexibility for DATS riders.

Increasing the availability of same-day trip bookings would enhance mobility options for DATS riders. Administration also anticipates that more DATS riders would shift their behaviour to same-day trip bookings, reducing the overall number of trip cancellations and no shows. When cancellations occur close to the scheduled pick-up time, they result in unnecessary vehicle travel and interruptions to other DATS riders.

Changing the service level for DATS to increase the availability of same-day trip bookings would require additional budget. Increasing the availability of same-day trip bookings would require investment in additional on-road resources, including operator positions, and could be accommodated within the existing fleet. Alternatively, same-day service could be provided

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through taxis, either through contracted paratransit service using taxis or through a taxi subsidy program.

3. Shortening the DATS Pick-up Window

DATS riders are provided a 30-minute pick-up window where they are required to be ready and available for their pick-up. DATS riders have access to real-time information tools to help them plan for and access their service, including:

- Automated phone call reminders the night before scheduled trips
- Imminent arrival notifications via phone or text
- The option to receive estimated arrival times in real-time via phone or text

While these tools can help DATS riders plan and prepare for their trips, they do not change the requirement that DATS riders must be ready to travel for a pick-up arriving anytime within the 30-minute pick-up window. A shorter pick-up window could minimize total trip times and enhance the DATS rider experience.

A jurisdictional scan was conducted on paratransit services in Canada (Attachment 5). The scan found that while a 30-minute pick-up window was aligned with industry standards, some paratransit services have shorter pick-up windows. For example, Calgary, Regina and Guelph provide a 20-minute pick-up window while Ottawa, Halifax and Strathcona County provide a 30-minute pick-up window.

Changing the service level for DATS to a 20-minute pick-up window would require additional budget to fund the additional service. Due to garage capacity constraints, this may be more feasible with the planned expansion of DATS fleet capacity, which is associated with the new garage opening in the 2026-2030 budget cycle. This garage is part of the Fleet Storage, Operations and Maintenance Facility Strategy approved by Council in February 2022. It is also expected that ongoing enhancements to service model flexibility, including the integration of technology platforms to allow for real-time deployment of taxis, could reduce the cost and resource needs of shortening the DATS pick-up window. These enhancements are expected to reduce the number of vehicle hours required for each DATS trip while bringing down the overall cost per trip.

Administration is currently pursuing technical integration of the dispatch software used by DATS with the software used by three major taxi companies contracted by DATS. This integration has the potential to address current deficiencies in the private accessible taxi sector while creating the technical support to potentially offer some subsidized taxi service for DATS riders.

Budget/Financial Implications

Should Council direct Administration to further explore any of the service options outlined in the report, further analysis of budget requirements would be completed as part of the supplemental budget adjustment process.

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Community Insight

ETS conducts an annual satisfaction survey with DATS riders using a combination of online, telephone and mail-in paper surveys to understand their experiences and satisfaction with using DATS. In September 2023, more than 240 DATS riders and caregivers of DATS riders participated in the survey. Overall satisfaction among DATS riders was 93 per cent in 2023, compared to 90 per cent in 2020. Trip aspects which saw an improvement in satisfaction included the ability to book their desired day and time, trip booking wait time, on-time arrival, affordability and receipt of pick-up/drop-off notifications. The survey also indicated there are opportunities to improve DATS rider experience, specifically related to ease of use of the online booking system, length of ride times, reliability and pick-up window.

The potential service enhancements outlined in the report were developed with consideration to feedback from the DATS Rider Satisfaction Survey and the DATS Advisory Group, comprised of transit riders who have lived experience using DATS. The options also align with findings from rider engagement conducted in 2018 related to the DATS service improvement plan as well as the completed Program and Service Review study.

GBA+

All riders are deserving of equitable access to transit service, regardless of income, age, ability, or other protected identity factors. Advancing equity and reducing barriers to accessing transit service is a key priority for ETS.

People with mobility challenges and other disabilities are more likely to be impacted by transportation barriers which can limit their use of public transit services and reduce their independence, mobility and access to other essential services. DATS offers a critical transportation service for Edmontonians with disabilities who are unable to use regular transit service. While DATS has met its 98 per cent trip accommodation rate target in the past several years while achieving nearly 100 per cent trip accommodation for advance booking, same-day trip requests and trip requests outside of DATS service hours are often challenging to accommodate due to operational constraints. These constraints create more barriers to transportation, resulting in lower mobility independence among DATS riders, who are required to plan ahead and book trips in advance. Late arrivals of DATS vehicles increase the waiting time of DATS riders beyond the pick-up window, creating hardship for more vulnerable DATS riders.

Expanding service hours would help provide a safer early morning or late night mobility option for more vulnerable DATS riders. Integrated taxi service would improve the reliability of service for those who need to travel to important medical appointments, social services, employment, education and other essential services. A shorter pick-up window would limit the time required to wait at pick-up locations, further enhancing the convenience and reliability of DATS.

Attachments

1. DATS Trip Volumes and Performance Indicators
2. DATS Program Service Enhancements Plan Progress Update
3. DATS Customer Satisfaction Survey - Summary of Key Metrics (2023, 2022, 2021, 2020)

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4. Jurisdictional Scan Service Hours
5. Jurisdictional Scan Pickup Windows